
This slim volume is an exquisite sample of book-making that clothes an exhaustive piece of scholarly research. “Christian Folk Art in the South Seas” is not, however, as first implications suggest, a study of the art of native con-
in the pagan foreground. The juxtaposition of these two expatriates, Blanc and Gauguin, has curious overtones. Blanc was a true primitive, just as were the Breton artisans whose stone carvings had been first to fire sophisticated Gauguin with a longing for things primitive.

The book also describes the painted churches of Hawaii, of which the best known is that of Waimanu, the work of a Belgian priest, Father John. A tiny wooden chapel within sight of the ocean, it startled the onlookers who cross its lattice threshold to suddenly find himself in a Gothic cathedral, seemingly immense and lighted by rays filtered through the stained glass of high rose windows. Father John succeeded here in painting a piece of make-believe as artful in its perspective effect as it is artless in its handling of pigments.

A few years ago, when I visited this little church, known in the islands as the Painted Church, I took it for granted that Father John, being Belgian, had sickened of the insistent beauty of the tropics that hemmed him and his church between palms and papaya trees, and that his painted cathedral was an exercise in escape. In this book, Frankenstein proves that the Cathedral of Burgos, via postcard, is his model, spoiling somewhat my simple theory. Father John had spent some of his seminary years in Spain, so we may now postulate that this strangely moving mural helped the missionary to recapture his youth.

Scenes depicting a good death, and Eve, and Hell, and the stigmatization of Saint Francis, line the side walls. Looking for what models inspired Father John, Frankenstein comes up with a list of names that never were listed in a history of art. It seems that Father John chose his models not for their eminence but for their availability. For his inspiration, he probably consulted what postcards he had kept within the pages of his visiting since seminary days.

The third artist, Father Evarist, is still active today and answered all the queries of the author as best he could. All the more mysterious remains the fact that his church at Kalapana is a thing of beauty. His richest iconographic source proved to be "Le Catechisme en Images," illustrated with the type of antiquated woodcuts that the enlightened connoisseur can only see as a sort of raw material for a Max Ernst to cut and paste into surrealist collages.

This book, treating of a kind of church art incompatible with what we usually understand to be good liturgical art, does so with a serious kindness and a gentle comprehension that raises for the liturgical art expert grave questions. Decades ago, when the liturgical art movement launched its sturdy battle for reform, one of its most potent weapons proved to be the assumption that good taste is an indispensable ingredient of good art. The battle is practically won. Bad taste has been relegated by the connoisseur into a limbo of its own, even perhaps to its own hell. To look at the naive works lovingly reproduced in this book suggests a difficult renunciation. Perhaps the good and the bad in art are not as clearcut as good and bad on moral grounds. Perhaps a kind of pharisaical pride has quenched our esthetic manifestos. Brother Blanc and Father John thought of art in terms of function. If taste entered in the making of their art, it was more of the kind one associates with cooking recipes than with art: the proof of the pudding, the proof of their art was in the rection of the wide-eyed parishioners to these visual sermons. As he dogmatically molded his esthetic concept to fit local instincts, the cleric turned artist veered away from accepted forms of art, and at times even from acceptable ones.

When we say that church art should be visual prayer, should not the comparison be followed through. There is a kind of liturgical art that patterns itself after the official prayer that speaks for a whole congregation. This collective prayer borrows its formulas from the biblical past and from the doctors of the Church. The corresponding art leans also heavily on the past, patterns its style, after the Byzantine if orthodox modern or, in dubious cases, after the Gothic. A sort of awesomeness emanates from the official prayer and the official art, that underlines the fact that the church is indeed the House of God.

Other forms of prayer are certainly valid. Such is the very private prayer of the publican, half hid behind a pillar, both fists passionately pressed against his eyeballs, intent on Improvising words to fit his own personal case. His very earnestness makes his prayer ungrammatical, and unimpressive indeed when compared with the resonant periods of the kings and prophets of ancient days. Has this kind of prayer its counterpart in our concept of a liturgical style or, in our eagerness to equate goodness with good taste, have we swept out of the church and into outer darkness, whenever given the chance, all art that falls...
below rather stiff professional standards. This little book raises indeed a grave question, of concern to those brave men who have, by now, practically won their battle for "good" art in the church.

Tying up with what thoughts the reading of this book aroused, I look at a photograph, one of the unretouched kind, of Saint Theresa of Lisieux. There she stands hugging with one hand a plaster statue of the Child Jesus, of a type that even Barclay Street must have discontinued, with, in her other hand the palette and the brushes of a painter. Theresa here consciously posed as the artist. What humble pride she may have felt in her artistic achievements cannot be shared by any conscientious art critics. Yet, the scrolls, and hearts, and lambs that she lovingly limned must have been most pleasing to God. Now that the liturgical battle has turned into a victory, it is perhaps time to ask of ourselves this question: have we kept in the church a place for innocence in art as God has kept a place for His innocents in Heaven?

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